

It appears that Reverend Hastie's conviction about the inferiority of Hinduism had been strengthened by the confidence derived from association with a conquering power. If his campaign persuaded some Hindu youths, it provoked an even more powerful tide of Hindu defensive passion. Among the numerous educated Hindus who protested against Hastie's sweeping and ignorant indictment, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the first great novelist of modern India, and the first systematic exponent of "Hindu nationalism" was one (Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered*, Oxford University Press, 1988, pp 6-9, p 122). And his views had a wider, deeper appeal than the modern, scientific, secular outlook of the 'Young Bengal' movement inspired by European rationalism.

Bankim Chandra's notion of a Hindu nation was a major cultural response to the ethnocentric European propagation of modernity. The favourite and loaded term for modernity in early colonial Bengal had been 'Sabyota' (an extended connotation of 'civility') (See Hiren Gohain, *The Idea of Popular Culture in Early 19th Century Bengal*, K P Bagchi and Sons, Kolkata, 1990) and Bankim Chandra had had resort to contemporary European ideas of nationhood and nationalism to construct a collective Hindu identity as a counterweight to the pressures of European ethnocentrism. It is significant that he excluded Muslims from its fold, and indeed identified the Muslims as the source of defilement and degradation of the Hindus. Significantly his opponent Reverend Hastie also invoked the Muslim bogey in his rhetoric, and reminded the Hindus how

of Phuloguri, Nagaon district in Assam, driven desperate by a steep hike in land revenue and imposition of taxes on their wretched little kitchen gardens, rose in revolt, they were condemned outright in harsh and brutal language by the *Arunodi*, the first newsmagazine in Assamese, an organ of modernity, published by the American Baptist Mission. There has been some recent attempts to exonerate this conduct with the plea that the rates of taxation had been insignificant, a matter of only a few rupees. These later champions forget how scarce money had been among these peasants, and how in the following century many 'rupats' of Assam became landless for defaulting on land revenue at the rate of one rupee per 'bigha'. (It must be made clear that we here criticize the church for its association with the colonial system, and not Christianity itself.)

What hurt educated native sentiments in Bengal most was the ceaseless and vehement campaign of the church in early colonial times against Hindu religious ideas and practices. And Bengal was the pioneer of the Indian awakening into modernity in colonial times. No doubt many of their structures on Hindu superstitions were just and well founded. But their tone was hardly calculated to persuade, as it was a combination of

intelligentsia of Bengal, primarily because of middle-class opposition to extension of democracy and to true radicalism. The continuity of the colonial class structure into independent India reinforced, and was itself in turn reinforced, by Hindu chauvinism. In the meantime, the erstwhile revolutionary later reconciled to British domination, V D Savarkar, invoked Hindutva as the basis of Indian nationalism, and the mentor of the RSS in the 1950s and the 1960s, Guru Gobwalkar, reiterated the same ideas in *We, or, Our Nationhood Defined*. From imperialism the enemy had quietly changed shape to turn into Islam. Then as now, the erroneous and fatal identification of the enemy has been the product of a collusion between colonialism and native ruling elites.

The idea of a "composite nation" proposed by Gandhi had a greater popular democratic potential, but perhaps his lack of revolutionary class-outlook failed to instil it with transforming power.

The only viable and healthy response to the cultural crisis of modern India was popular and radical democracy. Instead of which we are imbibing a concoction brewed under colonial patronage, with predictable consequences. And a mechanistically oriented left movement, unable to discern the traces of colonial consciousness in modern Indian culture, can find no antidote to this poison. Attempts to correct the error are met with a volley of foul and vulgar abuse, which after all is a hoary defensive mechanism. ■

This article first appeared in the Nov. 16 issue of the Bombay-based *Economic and Political Weekly*

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